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Congress and the Birch Society

Chairman Walter's reluctance to unleash the House Un-American Activities Committee against the rightist radicals of the Birch Society would be more commendable if it were less inconsistent with his zeal in the pursuit of heresy on the left. To charges from alarmed Congressmen that this secret right-wing organization is a menace to the republic and a fitting subject for his attention, Mr. Walter has replied with sanctimonious qualms about his committee's jurisdiction. If he had ever before displayed respect for the freedom of individuals as he does now for a conspiracy of the extreme right, his impartiality has gone unrecorded.

That the Birch Society is anti-democratic in spirit, authoritarian in practice and lunatic in outlook seems clear. The fuhrer principle on which one Robert Welch Jr. directs its clandestine operations, the hate literature it produces, the wild accusations it makes against respectable citizens (it has listed former President Eisenhower, the late John Foster Dulles and CIA Director Allen Dulles as Communists) suggests that it is one of the zanier political aberrations of our time. It represents a serious problem in mental health.

But both the diagnoses and the therapy required are beyond the competence of Walter and his staff for more reasons than that of jurisdiction. In a large sense, the Birch Society, like the South's White Citizens Councils, has been nourished by the committee's political quackery. In treating the communist problem as a critical internal disorder when its threat is primarily external, by debasing civil liberties and encouraging intellectual vigilantism, the Walter brigade has impaired the nation's political senses and alarmed the extremists

who use "anti-communism" as a cover for their attacks on all liberal thought.

The rightist "un-Americanism" now being viewed with concern on Capitol Hill has been nurtured by the very committee to which the great majority of Congress disgracefully pandered.

The Dept. of Justice is well equipped to handle any lawless action by the Birch Society, the White Citizens Councils, the Ku Klux Klan and whatever security problem the decrepit remnants of the Communist Party may present. All it needs is a will to act where the challenge is real, rather than rhetorical. The Attorney General's office, according to one of Bobby Kennedy's spokesmen, regards the Birch Society as "a matter of concern" and presumably will keep an eye on it. What should be done about it remains to be seen.

It is hard to believe that a society that has branded Dwight D. Eisenhower a Communist—an accusation now grudgingly modified by Mr. Welch—can make much headway in American soil; the hostile reaction of conservative newspapers to its deeds is a welcome contrast to the fashion with which the same journals flinched in the face of McCarthyism.

That one of the Society's major public tenets is support for the House Un-American Activities Committee is some measure of what is wrong with the committee, and with the Congress that protects it. To put it simply, the committees led by Rep. Walter and his Senate counterpart, Jim Eastland, probably represent a more serious threat to free institutions, at this juncture, than does Robert Welch, a crude admirer of their works.